

The Private Sorrows of the Overthrow

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“Thus are tragic private sorrows, and momentous public events
closely intermingled.”

—*The Friend*, 1893

WHILE MANY ARE FAMILIAR with the public tragedy of the overthrow of Queen Lili‘uokalani, far fewer know of the private, personal misfortune that affected the families of two of the key United States participants in the events of January 17, 1893. The public actions of John Leavitt Stevens, American minister, and Gilbert Cornwall Wiltse, captain of the U.S.S. *Boston*, especially during the establishment of a U.S. Protectorate over the Provisional Government,¹ helped assure the success of the revolution that toppled the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. Nothing could protect their private lives, on the other hand, from death and sickness.

DEATH OF THE DAUGHTER OF JOHN L. STEVENS

Amidst the national turmoil, personal calamity would strike the American minister less than two weeks after the overthrow. On January 30, 1893, Grace Louise Stevens (Figure 1), the thirty-seven-year-old daughter of John L. Stevens (Figure 2), and Mary Lowell Stevens (née Smith) (Figure 3), drowned off Kūka‘iau Landing at Hāmākua,

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The Hawaiian Journal of History, vol. 50 (2016)



FIGURE 1. A photograph of Grace Stevens by Elizabeth Hall (Mrs. W.W. Hall) was taken days before her death, which Lili'uokalani considered "a judgment from heaven." The husband of the photographer, W.W. Hall, was a member of the Committee of Thirteen, which forced the Queen's brother, King David Kalākaua, to sign the "Bayonet" Constitution of 1887. Courtesy Hawai'i State Archives [PP-79-2-005].

Hawai'i, while trying to board an inter-island steamer to return to O'ahu. The *Friend* gave a detailed account of her final moments:

She had been safely lowered into the boat of the *Kinau*, which had also pushed out towards the ship, but owing to a misunderstanding turned back. A heavy roller capsized the boat, which was shattered upon the rocks. The native mate, a powerful man, seized Miss Stevens, but a second roller tore her from his grasp and flung her against the rocks. A second boat came in and rescued the five natives, who were good swimmers, and recovered the body of the unfortunate lady.²

Save for the overthrow, Grace Stevens may never have attempted to board the *Kinau* from the Hawai'i Island landing in rough seas: "Hearing of the revolution in Honolulu, and of her father's need of her wonted aid as his private secretary, she hastened to his help, hero-

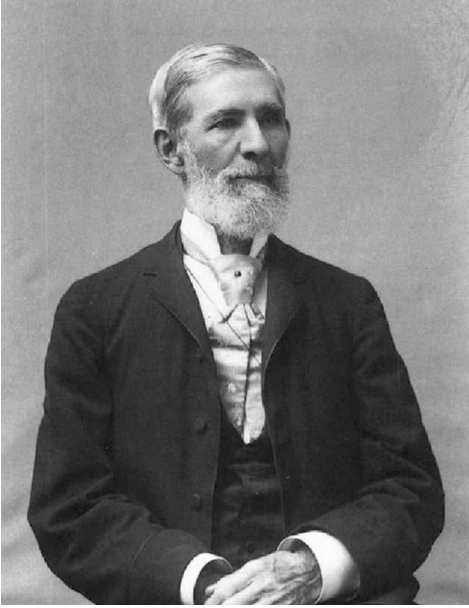


FIGURE 2. John Leavitt Stevens, American minister during the overthrow, lost his daughter less than two weeks after the end of the monarchy. Courtesy Hawai'i State Archives [PP-79-2-015].

FIGURE 3. Mary Lowell Smith, mother of Grace Stevens, married John L. Stevens in Hallowell, Maine, on May 10, 1845. She became his widow on February 8, 1895. Courtesy Hawai'i State Archives [PP-79-2-008].



ically encountering the somewhat perilous, yet rarely disastrous transit from the precipice to the ship, in order to expedite her coming.”³

The body of Grace Stevens was returned to Honolulu on January 31, 1893. That same day the Provisional Government had requested a U.S. protectorate of Hawai‘i. Sanford Ballard Dole and his ministers wrote to Stevens: “Believing that we are unable to satisfactorily protect life and property, and to prevent civil disorder in Honolulu and throughout the Hawaiian Islands, we hereby, in obedience to the instructions of the Advisory Council, pray that you will raise the flag of the United States of America for the protection of the Hawaiian Islands for the time being.”⁴

The *Friend* records how the American minister reacted to personal heartbreak in the midst of diplomatic obligation:

On the night when the terrible blow fell upon his household, the Minister was deeply engrossed in preparing for the morning’s mail his final dispatches to his government respecting the revolution, and the raising of the American flag to take place the next morning. By heroic effort of will, grief was postponed for duty, and the dispatches were completed.⁵

The protectorate, under the authority of Stevens and the signature of Wiltse,⁶ was announced on February 1, 1893, proclaimed at Ali‘iolani Hale and also printed in local newspapers:

To the Hawaiian People.

At the request of the Provisional Government of the Hawaiian Islands, I hereby, in the name of the United States of America, assume protection of life and property, and occupation of public buildings and Hawaiian soil, so far as may be necessary for the purpose of specified, but not interfering with the administration of public affairs by the Provisional Government.

This action is taken pending, and subject to, negotiations at Washington.

John L. Stevens.

Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the
United States.

United States Legation, February 1, 1893.

Approved and executed by

G.C. Wiltse, Captain U.S.N.

Commanding the United States Ship “Boston.”⁷

The day following the announcement, on February 2, 1893, the funeral of Grace Louise Stevens took place at the Nu'uaniu Avenue residence of Minister Stevens. H.W. Severance, consul-general, announced that U.S. consulate would be closed at 2 p.m. because of the funeral.⁸ Attending the 4 p.m. services were many of her friends "among whom Miss Stevens' social gifts and graces had won for her a large share of affection and respect."⁹ The service was conducted by the Rev. Dr. Edward Griffin Beckwith of Central Union Church, with music sung by the church's choir. Though not interpreted as a sign: "the rain, which had come down so heavily in the morning for the time being ceased, as the assembly followed the long lines of carriages up to the Nu'uaniu cemetery."¹⁰

Through her efforts related to the U.S. consulate, Grace Stevens had made contact with many of the American residents in Hawai'i. The *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* noted:

Many were the heartfelt expressions of sympathy for the bereaved family, and in fact the whole community is touched with a fellow-feeling of sorrow at the sudden death of one who had so graciously sustained the social amenities of her position in the American Minister's household.¹¹

Grace Stevens had first arrived in Hawai'i with her parents on September 20, 1889, aboard the *Australia*. Members of the Provisional Government and officers of the U.S.S. *Boston* also attended her funeral.

John L. Stevens wrote to Dole on February 7, 1893: "Mr. & Mrs. Stevens and daughters warmly appreciate your sentiments of deep sympathy in our great affliction expressed by yourself and Colleagues of the Provisional Government."¹²

She was also remembered by residents of the island of Hawai'i, where she had died. Her death, the *Hawaiian Gazette* later reported, "brought the deepest affliction to her friends, and cast a sadness and gloom over the entire island."¹³

Minister Stevens would later present one hundred dollars to the "native boat steerer of the S.S. Kinau who heroically tried to save the late Miss Stevens."¹⁴ The police on the island of Hawai'i, nevertheless, conducted an investigation into the circumstances that led to her death. The *Hawaiian Gazette* reported:

A court of inquiry is now sitting to ascertain the true cause of the accident. Some very damaging testimony has come before it. Mr. Williams, Deputy Sheriff of Hamakua, has been occupied with the case, and has made a thorough investigation. He has worked hard, and has undoubtedly ascertained the true facts of the case.¹⁵

The inquiry resulted in a report by George H. Williams to E.G. Hitchcock, Sheriff of Hawai'i, that contained the "salient facts."¹⁶ Williams included the facts that "the landing was 'somewhat' rough, but not dangerously so, if the boat contained a smart crew" and that "Mrs. Albert Horner was informed by Telephone that the party or parties using the landing would take their own chances."¹⁷ The testimony of Robert Horner, assistant manager of the landing, noted that the last time his father arrived at the landing it "was considerably rougher, and yet considered safe for landing."¹⁸ He also recorded what were among the last words of Stevens, when she asked, "'Why is there no white officer in charge of the boat?'"¹⁹ The testimony, dated February 2, 1893, described her near rescue. A Hawaiian crew member was able to get her to shore and was holding a guy wire connected to a crane at the landing and her left hand. Two waves covered them and then Stevens got on the man's back and the two attempted to get to higher ground. Yet another wave struck the two, with the man tossed on the rocks and Stevens pulled by the undertow out to sea. By the time a second boat got to her body she was dead.²⁰

Although she never married, Grace Stevens would leave behind a namesake. The daughter of Charles Lunt Carter, born February 4, 1893, would be named Grace Stevens Carter. Her father would himself later tragically die during the counter-revolution of 1895, its sole fatality.²¹ Charles L. Carter was one of the commissioners sent to Washington, D.C., to request U.S. annexation of the islands. Carter (Figure 4) was the son of Henry Alpheus Peirce Carter, diplomat for the Hawaiian Kingdom, and nephew of Albert Francis Judd, Supreme Court Justice of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and grandson of Gerrit Parmele Judd, member of the third company of missionaries sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

Lili'uokalani wrote in her diary, on February 8, 1893, a week after the U.S. flag had been raised over Ali'iolani Hale: "Drove by the Palace and would not look at the American Flag over the Government



FIGURE 4. Charles Lunt Carter named his daughter Grace Stevens Carter after the recently deceased daughter of John L. Stevens. He would die during the Counter-Revolution of 1895, its sole fatality. Courtesy Hawai'i State Archives [PP-69-2-013].

building. Time may wear off the feeling of injury by and by – but my dear flag – the Hawaiian flag – that a strange flag should wave over it. May heaven look down on these Missionaries and punish them for their deeds.”²²

ILLNESS AND DEATH OF CAPTAIN WILTSE

The mental illness and death of Gilbert Cornwall Wiltse (Figure 5) involved another principal participant in the overthrow. Wiltse had sent an armed force from the U.S.S. *Boston* to protect American lives and property, leading Lili'uokalani to

yield to the superior force of the United States of America whose Minister Plenipotentiary, His Excellency John L. Stevens, has caused United



FIGURE 5. Captain Gilbert C. Wiltse (second from the left), commander of the U.S.S. *Boston*, stands in front of 'Iolani Palace with Sanford Ballard Dole (third from the left), head of the Provisional Government. Courtesy Hawai'i State Archives [PP-36-3-006].

States troops to be landed at Honolulu and declared that he would support the said Provisional Government.²³

The *San Francisco Call* attributed his mental illness to a stroke that occurred in Rio de Janeiro en route to Hawai'i. The illness became more apparent following his actions during the overthrow:

He became unnaturally gay, unnaturally communicative, and the only thing he would talk of was his action in claiming the islands of the United States. He would walk about the shore, and pointing to the stars and stripes would say, 'Look! I put it there and I will keep it there; no man will dare haul it down!' [. . .] To those who were not acquainted with the captain, this bombastic talk seemed more than ridiculous. To his officers it was painful, for they saw in it the signs of mental derangement.²⁴

The *Hawaii Holomua* reprinted the story of his last days from the *San Francisco Call*: "In February [1893] his time was up, his three years' service ended and the last of the month he was relieved by Capt. Day."²⁵

Lili'uokalani wrote in her diary for Saturday, April 1, 1893: "At eleven the Hawaiian flag will be raised while the Stars and stripes will be hauled down over the Government building."²⁶

The *Hawaii Holomua* republished the account, titled "Story of Wiltse. Hallucinations of the Naval Officer. His Brain was Impaired," The article noted the change in presidential administration in Washington, D.C. (President Grover Cleveland had been inaugurated March 4, 1893), its response to the question of annexation, and its impact on Wiltse. Unlike his immediate predecessor, President Benjamin Harrison, who had sent a treaty of annexation to the United States Senate, President Cleveland supported the restoration of Lili'uokalani to the throne and sent a new minister to represent the United States in Hawai'i. The *Hawaii Holomua* reported:

Capt. Wiltse called at the White House and was refused admittance. He went to the Navy Department and there was censured. The next day came the news that the flag had been hauled down at Honolulu.

Forty eight hours later he died.

'A stroke of apoplexy,' the doctor said.²⁷

The death of Wiltse on April 26, 1893, in New York City, was "unexpected by his family and friends."²⁸ The *New York Times* reported that Wiltse had died of "congestion of the brain."²⁹

Less than a month after the death of Wiltse, Minister Stevens and his wife left Hawai'i, aboard the same ship they had arrived on with their late daughter, the *Australia*, on May 24, 1893.³⁰ He had relinquished his position just six days earlier. Lili'uokalani wrote in her diary that day:

Mr. Parker brought news that Mr. Blount had said Mr. J. L. Stevens, American Minister to Hawaii went back to the U.S. on the steamer *Australia* with a history which has never been paralleled before in Hawaii for placing our Country in such a position before and with such a weak Cabinet his actions in supporting a few men to rebel proved successful. May he be made to suffer as much as the many pangs he has caused amongst my people. He took back with him the remains of his daughter. Her death I consider a judgment from heaven.³¹



FIGURE 6. A photograph of Capt. Gilbert C. Wiltse appeared in *Picturesque Hawaii*, an 1894 book authored by John L. Stevens and William Brewster Oleson, president of Kamehameha Schools. Oleson was a member of the Committee of Thirteen. Public Domain, photograph from *Picturesque Hawaii*.

John L. Stevens would die less than two years after leaving Hawai'i, on February 8, 1895, in Augusta, Maine, at age 74, but not before he co-authored a book titled *Picturesque Hawaii*.³² The book that in part defended his conduct was jointly written with William Brewster Oleson, president of the Kamehameha Schools and a member of the Committee of Thirteen, which had presented the "Bayonet" Constitution of 1887 to King Kalākaua for signature.

Upon learning of the death of John L. Stevens, United States Senator William P. Frye, a supporter of the minister's actions in Hawai'i, recalled the impact that the loss of Grace Stevens had on the former diplomat: "He was hardly himself [. . .] on account of a nervous

shock he had received by the recent death of his daughter, and he has not been well since.”³³

John L. Stevens was buried with his daughter, Grace Stevens, in Hallowell Village Cemetery in Kennebec County, Maine.

Within a hundred days of the overthrow death and illness afflicted the families of two of the major American participants in the demise of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. The two signatories of the order for the U.S. protectorate would themselves see no protection from private tragedy.

NOTES

- ¹ “Protectorate,” *Liberal*, Feb. 1, 1893, 2.
- ² “Death of Miss Stevens,” *F*, March 1893, 18.
- ³ “Death of Miss Stevens,” *F*, March 1893, 18.
- ⁴ Letter to John L. Stevens from Sanford B. Dole, et al, Foreign Officials in Hawaii, United States of America, Jan-Feb. 1893, Series 403, Box 31, Folder 488, AH.
- ⁵ “Death of Miss Stevens,” *F*, March 1893, 18.
- ⁶ Duplicate Order, Sundry Documents of the Overthrow, 1893, FO&Ex, Series 402, Box 41, Folder 488, AH.
- ⁷ “Protectorate,” *Liberal*, Feb. 1, 1893, 2.
- ⁸ [Advertisement], *PCA*, Feb. 2, 1893, 2.
- ⁹ “Funeral of Miss Stevens,” *PCA*, Feb. 3, 1893, 2.
- ¹⁰ “Funeral of Miss Stevens,” *PCA*, Feb. 3, 1893, 2.
- ¹¹ “Funeral of Miss Stevens,” *PCA*, Feb. 3, 1893, 2.
- ¹² Letter from John L. Stevens to Sanford B. Dole, Feb. 7, 1893, Foreign Officials in Hawaii, United States of America, Jan-Feb. 1893, Series 403, Box 31, Folder 488, AH.
- ¹³ “Hamakua Notes,” *HG*, Feb. 21, 1893, 5.
- ¹⁴ *PCA*, Feb. 15, 1893, 3.
- ¹⁵ *PCA*, Feb. 15, 1893, 3.
- ¹⁶ Inquests from the Island of Hawaii 1893, Series 370, AH.
- ¹⁷ Inquests from the Island of Hawaii 1893, Series 370, AH.
- ¹⁸ Inquests from the Island of Hawaii 1893, Series 370, AH.
- ¹⁹ Report from George H. Williams to E.G. Hitchcock, Inquests from the Island of Hawaii 1893, Series 370, AH.
- ²⁰ Testimony of Robert Horner, Inquests from the Island of Hawaii 1893, Series 370, AH.
- ²¹ George R. Carter, *A Record of the Descendants of Dr. Gerrit P. Judd of Hawaii* (Honolulu, July 1922) 18.
- ²² Liliuokalani Collection, M-93, Box 12, Folder 120, AH.
- ²³ “Provisional Government of Hawaii, Order No. 2,” *HG*, Jan. 24, 1893, 2.

- ²⁴ Charles H. Wetmore, "Story of Wiltse. Hallucinations of the Naval Officer. His Brain was Impaired," *San Francisco Call*, November 13, 1893, 1.
- ²⁵ "The Story of Wiltse!" *Hawaii Holomua*, Jan. 2, 1894, 2.
- ²⁶ Liliuokalani Collection, M-93, Box 12, Folder 120, AH.
- ²⁷ "The Story of Wiltse!" *Hawaii Holomua*, Jan. 2, 1894, 2.
- ²⁸ "Capt. Wiltse Dead: Congestion of the Brain Carries Off the Boston's Old Commander," *New York Times*, Apr. 27, 1893.
- ²⁹ "Capt. Wiltse Dead: Congestion of the Brain Carries Off the Boston's Old Commander," *New York Times*, Apr. 27, 1893.
- ³⁰ *Hawaiian Star*, Apr. 10, 1893, 3.
- ³¹ Liliuokalani Collection, M-93, Box 12, Folder 120, AH.
- ³² John L. Stevens and W.B. Oleson, *Picturesque Hawaii: A Charming Description of Her Unique History, Strange People, Exquisite Climate, Wondrous Volcanoes, Luxurious Productions, Beautiful Cities, Corrupt Monarchy, Recent Revolution and Provisional Government* (Edgewood Publishers), [1894].
- ³³ "Death of Ex-Minister John L. Stevens," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 8, 1895, 2.